

GROUNDWATER QUALITY / ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ISSUE

Up to Its Neck in Water Woes

Because of tainted and faulty wells, Alpaugh residents have for the last 13 months lined up to fill jugs from a tank. Now, a new crisis looms.

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By Daryl Kelley, staff writer

ALPAUGH, Calif. — For the last time, Lucy Mendoza today will drive her Mexican immigrant parents to a steel storage tank in the center of this bleak farm town, so they can fill plastic jugs with water to quench the thirst of 13 family members.

"We drink that water and use it to cook," said the 27-year-old mother of three, who picks and packs grapes for minimum wage. "Now it's going to be really hard because of the cost, and we'll have to travel to get it."

It has been 2 1/2 years since the 760 residents of this impoverished San Joaquin Valley community could safely drink water from the tap. First, arsenic tainted the town's main well and a backup well failed, and then faulty installation of a new well kept a state order to boil tap water in place.

Now, the "community tank" is being removed, after 13 months in place at the Veterans' Memorial Building, the community center in this tiny town of 250 aging mobile homes and small houses.

And a family the size of Mendoza's could pay as much as \$60 a month for drinking water, plus gasoline to drive 13 miles to Earlimart, the nearest town with cheap bottled water. That's on top of a \$45 monthly fee for water used for toilets, laundry and landscapes.

"Alpaugh is certainly a community in need of everything," said Danny Santos, a social services worker from Visalia.

The typical Alpaugh resident makes just \$8,200 a year, one-third the California norm, and 97% of local students receive free lunches.

It's a town of senior citizens with no other place to go and of Spanish-speaking laborers working to provide a future for their children. And it was a town where residents gladly lined up like people in a Third World country to fill their water jugs for free three times a week.

Now, it's a town without even that.

"Some people say Alpaugh is the stepchild of Tulare County; I say we're the forgotten ones. Rural families are an endangered species," said community activist Sandra Meraz, 63, a water board member who has overseen deliveries at the community tank.

In fact, Alpaugh has been praised as a model of how the state and federal government can respond to a community in need, committing more than \$4 million in recent years to drill new wells and build a modern water delivery and filtration system in this old cotton town where Dust Bowl migrants have been replaced by Mexican immigrants.

The community tank was installed after Assemblywoman Nicole Parra (D-Hanford), stunned by conditions she found one stifling day in July 2003, solicited more than \$33,000 in donations. Wal-Mart contributed \$14,500 and two truckloads of bottled water, and BP-ARCO installed bottled water in every classroom at the 265-student Alpaugh School.

But now there's only \$20 left in the community water fund. So Meraz and Bill Herms, Parra's chief of staff, were faced with a difficult decision: Should they ask their corporate donors for more money for water to tide the town over until its faulty well is fixed, presumably within a few weeks, or should they allow the tank to go, to pressure government bureaucrats to finally fulfill their promises?

They chose to use the tank as leverage.

"That new well was supposed to be ready in four months, then six months and now it's been more than a year," Herms said. "It should have been done by now." The well on the edge of town produces plenty of water that is safe to drink by government standards, state health officials say. But because the well casing was installed at an angle, the well is not sealed at the top where the pump meets the casing. That leaves 4-inch to 6-inch gaps, where animals or vandals could taint supplies, officials said.

Completion of the well has been delayed in part by a legal dispute between the Alpaugh Irrigation District, which will own it, and the now-bankrupt company that drilled it.

Jim Stites, district engineer for the state Department of Health Services in Fresno, said he wants to lift the order that Alpaugh tap water be boiled before drinking, but can't until the well is sealed or, at least, secured by a fence to keep out humans and animals.

"Ideally, we'd like to see the well sealed," he said. "But if they don't have the money to do that, the next best thing is to put up some type of security around the wellhead."

Stites said he'd been told by the engineering consultant working with the irrigation district that a temporary seal could be placed on it for \$4,600. "But they say they don't know where that money would come from," Stites said.

State and federal officials say a solution may be only days or weeks away.

U.S. Department of Agriculture official Paul Lehman, the assistant state director for rural development, said the agency had provided \$611,000 to the Alpaugh Irrigation District to drill the well that remains unsealed. The agency is also providing nearly \$2 million in grants and loans for eventual construction of a second well and a new community water system.

Lehman said in an interview Monday that he was surprised by the threatened removal of the community tank and had not received any information from the irrigation district about the cost of a temporary seal.

"The bottom line here is we are very flexible on the use of this money, and it's clear to us that this problem needs to be fixed," he said. "It wasn't realized until today that the drinking water supply was going to run out."

Lehman said later that his agency had been in touch with the irrigation district and state health officials, and that they were all working to ensure Alpaugh residents are not left without drinking water.

"If it's just a matter of a seal, I can't imagine it will take very long," he said. "This one just kind of snuck up on everybody."

The residents of Alpaugh are hoping a fix is in the offing.

Barbara Pearson, 73, and her 75-year-old husband Sam, a disabled former ranch foreman, are counting on it.

To get water, Barbara said she'd have to put her husband, who has Parkinson's disease and uses a wheelchair, in their van and take him with her to Corcoran, 16 miles away. There she could fill the 12 one-gallon jugs she uses each week for 25 cents a gallon. That's \$3 a week, and \$4.50 for gas each trip — about \$30 a month, plus the inconvenience, she said. And that's on top of the standard \$45 monthly water bill.

"The hardship will be quite significant," she said. "We're on Social Security, and we don't have that kind of extra money. We can't afford it, but we're going to have to."

Alpaugh School Supt. David Andreasen said he has about a week's supply of bottled water left but the school breaks three weeks for Christmas on Friday, and students won't return until Jan. 10.

Cotton farmer Steve Martin, president of the Alpaugh Irrigation District, said he will have the well sealed by then.

"The [Agriculture Department] called today and said they would provide the money," Martin said late Tuesday, referring to the \$4,600. "No matter what, we're going to go ahead and seal it."#

<http://www.latimes.com/news/science/environment/la-me-water15dec15,1,6300935.story?coll=la-news-environment>